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U.S. envoy says Congress drove Contras out of fight

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TEGUCIGALPA, Honduras — The U.S. congressional cutoff of financial aid to anti-Sandinista insurgents in Nicaragua has driven nearly half of the resistance fighters out of the battle, U.S. Ambassador John D. Negroponte said yesterday.

Before Congress refused last month to approve President Reagan's request for \$14 million in aid,

about "90-95 percent" of an estimated 15,000 resistance fighters were battling the Marxist government, he said.

"Today they have about 50 percent of their forces in the field," he said.

Mr. Negroponte said the anti-Sandinista forces might be able to change the increasingly totalitarian policies of the Nicaraguan government and reduce the Sandinista threat to its Central American

neighbors if the resistance receives steady U.S. aid.

"Properly supported with a reliable source of material and financial support, the anti-Sandinista resistance could make a significant difference inside Nicaragua," he said.

Mr. Negroponte, who is scheduled to return to Washington today after 3½ years as U.S. ambassador here, made his comments in an interview

with The Washington Times last night. President Reagan has announced his nomination to be assistant secretary of state for oceans and international environment and scientific affairs.

In the interview, he reviewed the precarious situation of the fledgling democratic government of Honduras and expressed hope that the military would continue to support civilian rule, especially now that the government is struggling through a constitutional crisis. The crisis was sparked by a power struggle in the Honduran congress that led to the temporary jailing of the chief supreme court justice by President Roberto Suazo Cordova.

As ambassador to Honduras, Mr. Negroponte has lived through an

unstable period that saw a transition from military to civilian rule.

"Honduras is a country surrounded by trouble," Mr. Negroponte said. "There is a large military buildup in Nicaragua, which is intimidating to this country, not to mention Nicaragua's political orientation toward the Soviet Union and Cuba... There is also, of course an unresolved civil war in El Salvador."

The tour sometimes became dangerous. Last year, his wife was accompanying two U.S. senators on a helicopter inspection of the Honduras-El Salvador border when the helicopter was shot down. All passengers escaped unhurt.

This month, Nicaraguan troops shelled and crossed into Honduran territory to disrupt resistance camps along the border between the two countries.

The Honduran government, alarmed by the Nicaraguan shelling

that destroyed villages and caused casualties, relocated several Contra camps out of artillery range. Honduras has officially denied that there are any anti-Sandinista camps in its territory. But the country has become a major U.S. ally here because it hosts the anti-Sandinistas as well as frequent U.S. military maneuvers. It is also considered an experiment in democracy that may help change the image of Central America.

"I've been here at a time when the Honduran democracy has been in a process of consolidation, and that's a positive development," Mr. Negroponte said.

"The next important step is the presidential and congressional elections in November, which I believe will take place successfully." "This is a democratic country in more ways than one," he said. "There is a free press. There is not a great discrepancy between rich and poor. There is

a strong labor movement. I believe the fundamental ingredients for stability are here."

"At the same time," he added, "we have to recognize that any country that has a history of military rule is susceptible to relapses. One has to guard against that."

He said that the current civilian and military leadership is "committed to making the constitution work." The military is playing a mediating role in trying to resolve the constitutional crisis that involves the number of presidential candidates permitted in the fall election. The Honduran congress began debating the issue last night.

"It has been overcome through dialogue," Mr. Negroponte said of the constitutional crisis.

"There was no violence, and the military establishment resisted the temptation of openly asserting itself in the situation. A great deal of restraint has been exercised."